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Kings in the Back Row: Meaning through Structure-A Reading of Salinger's 'The Catcher in the Rye'

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Criticism about: J(erome) D(avid) Salinger (1919-), **also known as:** J. D(avid) Salinger, Jerome David Salinger, J. D. Salinger

Nationality: American

[In *The Catcher in the Rye*,] Salinger sharply accentuates the portrayal of Holden with a symbolic structure of language, motif, episode, and character; and when the complex patterns are discovered, the effect is to concentrate our scrutiny on a masterpiece that moves effortlessly on the colloquial surface and at the same time uncovers, with hypnotic compulsion, a psychological drama of unrelenting terror and final beauty. (p. 6)

Salinger has employed neurotic deterioration, symbolical death, spiritual awakening, and psychological self-cure as the inspiration and burden of an elaborate pattern—verbal, thematic, and episodic, that yields the meaning as the discursive examination of Holden's character and problem out of metaphoric context can never do. Structure *is* meaning.

As a start, the readiest way of understanding *The Catcher* lies in an awareness of the dualism or ambivalence of language, for Holden employs both the slob and the literate idiom.... Holden's slob speech is obviously justified as a realistic narrative device, since it is the idiom of the American male; yet from the psychological point of view, it becomes the boy's self-protective, verbalized acceptance of the slob values of his prep school contemporaries. He thus may justify himself in his overt being and may hope to secure immunity from attack and rationalize his "belonging"; slob language, therefore, hits off two important social themes—security and status. But the psychological intent becomes symbolical portent when we see that the mass idiom emphasizes a significant distinction between two worlds—the phony world of corrupt materialism and Holden's private world of innocence.... For his private world Holden uses a literate and expressive English, and so the profounder psychological and symbolical purposes of slob language may be detected only as that idiom functions in polarized relationship with the other. We need not labor the point that the full range of Salinger's portrayal would never be disclosed without an awareness of the ambivalence of language. (pp. 7–8)

Once we have recognized the ambivalence of language we are prepared to discover Salinger's elaborate use of several kinds of pattern that support and help to develop the narrative. The first verbal pattern to be examined stands in an ironic and mutually illuminating relationship with the image of the secret goldfish at the head of the narrative symbolizing Holden and his secret world. In D. B.'s short story "The Secret Goldfish" the boy would not let others see the goldfish "because he'd bought it with his own money." Holden likewise was to pay in far more than money for his secret world; and as a further parallel, nobody ever saw (or cared to see) this secret world, although Holden invites inspection in the confessional mode, "if you really want to hear about it." This mode is maintained throughout with frequent interpolations of "if you want to know the truth" or "if you really want to know." As the story uncovers more and more of Holden's dilemma, these phrasings, although employed

in the most casual manner, transcend their merely conversational usage and become psychologically portentous. The inference is that society, including his own parents, has no desire to recognize the truth about Holden or its own obsessions. In the middle of the tale Holden learns from the psychoanalytical snob, Carl Luce, that his father had helped him to “adjust”; and the blunted resolution of the narrative on the Freudian couch represents society's final humiliating indifference to truth. Recognition of the truth would embrace the love and compassion that it has no time for but that Holden himself not only lavishes on his secret world but extends to the public world in episodes and reflections rounded off with a minor verbal pattern, “You felt sorry for her” or “I felt sorry as hell for him.” The confessional mode embraces still another verbal pattern put variously, “People never notice anything,” “He wasn't even listening,” “People never believe you,” and morons “never want to discuss anything.” The failure in communication could not be more bleakly confirmed; and there is an immense irony in the contrast between Holden's telling the truth and the indifference surrounding him. Note, then, that the confessional mode, developed by several verbal patterns, provides a beautifully formulated enclosing structure for the tale—with the symbolic image of the secret goldfish at the start and at the end of the equally symbolic talking couch.

Two other patterns ironically reenforce the confessional mode. At Pencey Dr. Thurmer had talked to Holden “about Life being a game,” and Mr. Spencer added for the truant's benefit, “Life *is* a game that one plays according to the rules.” Toward the end Mr. Antolini sustained the cliché in his overblown rhetoric. Considering Holden's own honesty and the indifference of his seniors, “playing the game” becomes a grisly farce; and there is further irony in the fact that Holden is himself fervently devoted to the concept, first in his treasuring Allie's baseball mitt and then in his confiding in Phoebe that he would like to be a catcher in the rye to save children from falling off “some crazy cliff.” And does he not wear his red hunting hat backwards like a catcher? Mr. Antolini, who speaks to Holden from a sophisticated height and warns him of a “terrible, terrible fall,” a “special kind of fall,” is capable, in these psychological terms, of no more than talk, for he arrived too late to catch young Castle, who jumped out the window to escape the persecution of his contemporaries. The second pattern furnishes an ironical grace note or two. At the beginning of the tale Holden thought that Mr. Spencer yelled “Good luck!” at him, and toward the close a teacher in Phoebe's school wished him “good luck.” Unrelenting in its vision of the double-dealing of society, *The Catcher* portrays teachers as sentimentalists and guardians of an exploded ethic; and one of them, Antolini, is a linguistic phony. In these closing patterns, then, the reverberations of irony appear to be endless, and the structure of language and motif is all the more impressive because everything is presented in such an artless and colloquial fashion.

If the design thus far disclosed may be construed as the motif of unsportsmanlike sportsmanship and if the social corollary is that by playing the game (but what *are* the rules?) one may achieve security and status, it remains to be said that society reduces Holden to an ambivalence of acceptance and rejection, of boastful claims and humiliating admissions that are, in effect, destructive of the integrity of his personality. Holden seeks status with his contemporaries by talking slob language, but he shows the same impulse with his elders in more subtle fashion. (pp. 9–11)

If society were no worse than a somewhat difficult but rational enough arrangement for status-seeking and if a person had merely to pay a stiff psychological price in adjustment for the rewards, Holden's frequent charge of “phony” might be dismissed. But the matter goes far deeper than that: society, in the repulsive form of Stradlater, subjects Holden to humiliations that pass beyond the legitimacies of playing the game. Holden's career discloses intensified patterns of ambivalence—withdrawal and aggression, guilt feelings, fantasies of mutilation, the death-wish; and the reason lies almost as much in the social encounter as in the death of his brother Allie. A society that ignores or rejects his gesture for understanding, that preempts his possessions, body, and mind, that invades and violates his inner being—such a society is not only status-seeking; it is actively and crudely anthropophagus and psychophagus. The vision of ugliness in *The Catcher* challenges anything else in the same genre. (p. 11)

The somewhat less than twenty pages of chapters four and six, the Stradlater episode, provide a brilliant instance

of Salinger's technical virtuosity. Here we have convincing evidence that this completely selfish and indifferent young animal did push Holden, in his already neurotic state, down the nightmarish incline toward the psychoanalytical couch.... Since it is the despoiling and humiliation of Holden Caulfield, the cynically indifferent invasion and stripping bare of his person, property, and secret imaginative world that is the burden of this episode, we note with fascinated attention how Stradlater possesses himself of all things that are Holden's, one after another. He uses Holden's Vitalis on his "gorgeous locks," he borrows Holden's hounds-tooth jacket for his date, and yawning all the while, he expects Holden to write his theme for him. A sovereign indifference to all about him is Stradlater's salient characteristic. He could not be bothered to get Jane Gallagher's first name right; he called her Jean. When Holden, with his studious care for the other person, asked whether Jane had enjoyed the game, Stradlater didn't know. A bitter humiliation for Holden is that he must ask this gorgeous phony, who has made a theme-slave of him, not to tell Jane that he is being expelled from Pencey; most galling for the reader is Holden's admission that Stradlater probably won't tell "mostly ... because he wasn't too interested."

It is, however, the imminently dangerous quality of sex that is frightening. In chapter four when Holden heard that Stradlater was to have a date with Jane Gallagher, he "nearly dropped *dead*" and "nearly went crazy," and in chapter six, through all the mounting ordeal, he "went right on smoking like a madman." The psychological significance of these verbalisms is unmistakable, for Stradlater has invaded Holden's secret world and violated a symbol of innocence and respect. Indeed, in the elaborate pattern of this episode, Stradlater, the "secret slob," matched Holden's secret world with his own, for when Holden was driven to ask the crude but important question, he announced with all the taunting impudence of his kind, "That's a professional secret, buddy."

When Holden recalls for this "sexy bastard" how he had met Jane and goes on to say that he used to play checkers with her, Stradlater's contemptuous comment is "*Checkers*, for Chrissake!" This girl, who had had a "lousy childhood" with a booze hound for a stepfather running "around the goddam house naked," always kept her kings in the back row. As Holden put it, "She just liked the way they looked when they were all in the back row." Half earnestly, half facetiously, he requests Stradlater to ask Jane whether she still keeps her kings in the back row; the symbolism of this imagery, portraying defense against sexual attack, is the central motif of the episode. Stradlater cannot, of course, know what a shocking and menacing figure he has become, for on the simple realistic level the request is merely casual reminiscence; but in the psychological context danger signals have begun fluttering in Holden's mind. If the request may be construed as Holden's desire to send Jane a secret warning against the slob who would himself be the bearer of the message, this defensive gesture, nevertheless, cannot issue in decisive action, and it remains no less symbolical than Holden's wearing his red hunting hat "with the peak around to the back and all." But these gestures indicate, so early in the narrative, that Holden is unconsciously preparing for his subsequent role as a catcher in the rye. In chapter six the futile best that he can do is to invite a beating at Stradlater's hands, and after the struggle he cannot, for a while, find the hat. All the protective gestures have dissolved in impotence, and with his nose "bleeding all over the place" Holden has had a thorough lesson in the game of life.

This lesson is all the more pathetic because in chapter five we have the first full glimpse of Holden's secret world and hence some indication of how, given a chance, Holden would play the game. The subject of his theme is his dead brother Allie's outfielder's mitt that has "poems written all over the fingers and pocket and everywhere." The mitt symbolically indicates that Holden would like to play the game with sensitivity and imagination, and Stradlater's crude rejection of the theme is itself a symbolic gesture, and a final one, shutting off all hope of communication. Holden tears the theme into pieces. But it should be added that, like Jane's kings in the back row, Holden's private world is impotent, and the effort at self-revelation in the theme is of a piece with this futility. His rapidly worsening neurotic condition has frozen him in this posture of feebleness, and indeed Holden must take Antolini's "special kind of fall" and disappear into the museum room where the mummies are and thus symbolically encounter death before he may be reborn to an active defense of his world. (pp. 12-14)

Holden's fantasy begins at the obvious and apparently extroverted level of "horsing around." With Ackley

Holden pretends to be a “blind guy,” saying, “Mother darling, give me your *hand*. Why won't you give me your *hand*?” Considering the view we get later of parental care *in absentia* or by remote control, and considering, furthermore, what has already been disclosed of the highly wrought design of *The Catcher*, we should not fail to note, so early in the novel, the motif of mutilation and the implied charge that a mother has not provided guidance and owes her son the hand that he has broken; with Holden the extroverted simply does not exist. Ackley's response is, “You're nuts, I swear to God.” Ackley calls Holden's hat a “deer shooting hat,” and Holden facetiously retorts, “I shoot people in this hat”; and once again, in the sequel, the facetious may be seen to envelop aggressive tendencies. The hat, indeed, is the central symbol of Holden's fantasy and so of the book—not only, as here, for aggression, but later for his humanitarian role, faintly foreshadowed, as we have already noted, in the Stradlater episode; and a third symbolic function of the hat is to hit off Holden's quest, which is in a large measure hysterical flight, as he rushes about New York before he comes home to Phoebe. Aggression and withdrawal follow each other rapidly in the opening scenes, the first with Stradlater when Holden leaps on him “like a goddam panther,” and the second when he wakes up Ackley and asks about joining a monastery.

In his hotel room, after “old Sunny,” the prostitute, has gone, he talks “sort of out loud” to Allie and expresses guilt feelings about his having refused to take Allie with him and a friend on a luncheon bike-trip because Allie was just a child. Since Allie's death, whenever Holden becomes depressed, he tries to make up for this past cruelty by saying that he may go along. Here, then, in his guilt feelings we have an explanation of why Holden broke his hand against the garage windows, and we may trace all the elements of his fantasizing to this psychological cause. Mutilation is itself the physical symbol of a psychological state of self-accusation and self-laceration. Hence, when Holden, after discovering that he cannot pray, reflects that next to Jesus the character in the Bible that he likes best is the lunatic that lived in the tombs and cut himself with stones, we observe a consistent psychological development of the motif of mutilation and, linked to it, the death-wish; and ... we note further Holden identifies himself with a madman. In *Mark*, V:1-20, we are told of the lunatic that broke all chains and fetters, for no man could tame him. Jesus drove the spirits that possessed him into the swine and told him to go home to his friends. If we are to comprehend what really happens in *The Catcher* we must attribute prime importance to this little scene of about two pages at the head of chapter fourteen; for Holden will subsequently break his morbid psychological fetters, he will go home to Phoebe, and, in a manner of speaking, he will be able to pray. (pp. 16-17)

The visit to Central Park and then home to Phoebe must be regarded as the two halves of a single, unfolding psychological experience; they provide the hinge on which *The Catcher* moves. Holden had started thinking about the ducks during his talk with “old” Spencer; and in New York he asked two cab drivers about what the ducks did in such wintry weather. Holden knew the park “like the back of [his] hand,” for as a child he had roller-skated and ridden his bike there. But now, searching for the lagoon, he is lost, and, as he says, “it kept getting darker and darker and spookier and spookier.” The park has become *terra incognita*. When at last he finds the lagoon there are no ducks. (pp. 18-19)

The psychological and thematic components of this little scene are profoundly rich and yet beautifully simple. Central Park represents Holden's Dark Tower, Dark Night of the Soul, and Wasteland; the paradise of his childhood is bleak, and the ducks that, in his fantasy, he has substituted for the human, have vanished. In effect, Holden is finished with childhood and is prepared for the burdens of maturity. But all the same he gathers up the pieces to be treasured, and in a final act of childhood profligacy—skipping coins over the lagoon—he symbolically rejects the materialism of the adult world that he is about to enter.

The apartment episode with Phoebe is so brilliant and so densely packed that we must examine it in two stages, here largely from Holden's point of view and later from Phoebe's. The meeting between brother and sister is presented as a conspiracy, for Holden enters the building under false pretenses and slips into his own apartment “quiet as hell.” “I really should've been a crook.” The anti-social bond is confirmed when Phoebe tells Holden that she has the part of Benedict Arnold in a Christmas play and when he gives her his symbolical hunting hat.

They are rebels and seekers both.

Almost the first thing that Holden notices in D. B.'s room where Phoebe usually sleeps when D. B. is away is her fantasizing with her middle name, which she changes frequently, the present one being "Weatherfield." The various kinds of fantasy have an important role in *The Catcher* and, in alliance with other motifs, hint at the philosophical question of the narrative: "What is the nature of reality?"

From this point onward the novel converges upon the answer. Meanwhile, Phoebe's fantasizing "killed" Holden; and in this and later scenes with children his mood is good humored, indulgent, and parental. The word "kill" is used throughout the novel in colloquial fashion, as here; but presently it reflects a rising hysteria when Phoebe exclaims again and again about Holden's leaving school, "Daddy'll *kill* you." Paradoxically, the terror exists not for Holden but for Phoebe, and the boy who had been fleeing from one physical and psychological terror after another now finds himself in the role of the elder who must reassure his young sister that nobody is going to kill him.

The spotlight is, furthermore, powerfully focused upon Holden's problem when Phoebe acts out a killing. She had seen a movie about a mercy killing; a doctor compassionately put a crippled child (on his way to the apartment Holden, continuing his mutilation fantasy, had been "limping like a bastard") out of its misery by smothering it with a blanket. In symbolic mimicry Phoebe places her pillow over her head and resists Holden's plea to come out from under. Here, indeed, is killing—"mercy" killing, and assuredly one way of dealing with children. But it would be a "mercy" also to save children, to catch them as they are about to fall off "some crazy cliff," and this is the humanitarian solution that Holden expresses to Phoebe. The anti-social conspiracy has blossomed into a benevolent and protective order. Antolini's thesis, coming belatedly as it does, merely renders conceptually the courage and maturity that Holden, with his imaginative heart, had discovered in the stolen moments of domestic affection and security with Phoebe. Salinger is intimating that for the imaginatively endowed the living experience may become the source of precept and rule. The point is that Holden is way ahead of his elders. (pp. 18–20)

From the start Holden is convinced that by either standard —society's or his own, he is a coward.... The [museum episode], unmistakably illuminating the climax of the book, shows that he is not a coward and that, in effect, he essentially has business to transact only with himself, and he must therefore stop running. In the museum of art when Holden walks down "this very narrow sort of hall" leading to the room containing the mummies, one of the two boys with him bolts and runs, the other says, "He's got a yella streak a mile wide," and he also flees. Not Holden but society is yellow.

Since Holden's neurosis includes feelings of insecurity stemming from Allie's death and from Jan Gallagher's "lousy childhood" (like his own) and since both Allie and Jane have become inextricably bound together in his mind, Holden conquers the two-fold hysteria at one and the same moment. There is sexual imagery in "this very narrow sort of hall" and the room containing the mummies, especially since the obscene word is written "with a red crayon ... right under the glass part of the wall." Once again as in Phoebe's school he reacts with weariness over the corruption of this world and solemnly reflects that if he ever dies and is buried, his tombstone will bear the ugly legend. Here, at last, the identity of the fear of death and the fear of sex is made clear, and these fears are to be seen, actually, as a pervasive fear of violence to body or spirit and the ensuing mutilation. If in the Stradlater episode and throughout the rest of the novel Holden is an innocent, he is so, not so much in terms of our popular literary tradition, but rather in a classical, Christian, or psychoanalytical schema. His very fears yield proof that his innocence represents a harmony of attributes and drives—intellectual, emotional, and physical, so that in the proper regulation of them harm will result neither for the person nor for others. Holden's obsession about faces indicates this fastidious care; the Egyptians tried to conquer the final violence of death by mummification so that, as Holden says, the face "would not rot." In Holden's encounter it is important that the spirit should not rot.

For insight into the psychologically symbolic meaning of the museum episode we turn once again to the structure of the novel. Allie's death has been such a traumatic experience that all Holden knows is death, for when "old" Spencer, who makes him "sound dead," confronts him with the unsatisfactory results of the history examination, it is clear that his historical knowledge is limited to the subject of mummification. It is to this knowledge, at the close of the book that he returns with a sense of how "nice and peaceful" it all is. The psychological journey from the fear of death to a calm acceptance of it is further highlighted at the beginning when we learn that Mr. Ossenburger, the mortician, has donated the dormitory wing named for him in which Holden has his room.

Holden's victorious encounter with death reveals psychological maturity, spiritual mastery, and the animal faith and resiliency of youth. The charmingly offhand and rather awesome conditional statement, "If I ever die" reminds the reader that in the last quarter of the book it is so difficult for Holden to think of Allie as dead that Phoebe must underscore the fact, "Allie's *dead*." Yet although Holden masters his neurosis he also falls victim to society, for in alternating stress the novel continuously presents two mingled actions—his own inner dealings with himself and society's brutal effect upon him. After his visit to the mummies Holden goes to the lavatory and proceeds to faint, i.e., symbolically dies; and his comment is that he was lucky in falling as he did because he "could've killed" himself. The parallelism with the earlier Stradlater episode leaps instantly to the mind, for then, as we recall, Holden "nearly dropped *dead*"; and that scene also took place in a lavatory—a fit symbol, in both instances, for a scatological society. Significantly, he feels better immediately after; and he is reborn into a new world of secure feelings and emotions, with himself fulfilling the office of catcher in his mature view of Phoebe. Thereafter the psychoanalytical couch can mean little to him, far less than Antolini's couch, to which it is thematically related.

The dense contrapuntal effect of the verbal patterns is, finally, enhanced by one that keeps a persistent drum beat in the background until the full thematic range of *The Catcher* is disclosed. If Holden symbolically and psychologically dies only to be reborn into the world of Phoebe's innocence and love, he has all through the novel been announcing the theme of regeneration in the "wake up" pattern. After the Stradlater episode Holden wakes up Ackley, then another schoolmate Woodruff (to sell him a typewriter), and as a derisive parting shot, "every bastard on the whole floor" with his yell, "*Sleep tight, ya morons!*" ... [The] thematic implication of the pattern transcends both the episodes and the characters involved; in moral as well as psychological terms Salinger is suggesting that a brutalized society requires regeneration and must arouse itself from its mechanistic sloth.

In a development that parallels the "wake up" pattern Salinger shows that Holden, of course, must wake up in his own way; and it has been the thesis of this reading of *The Catcher* that he does effect his own psychological regeneration.... Holden's secret world fails the boy not only outwardly in the encounter with society, but also inwardly in his retreat from circumstance, for it is effectively sealed off, so that, as with the outside world, there is here likewise no communication. The pattern that discloses this aspect of Holden's isolation is "giving old Jane a buzz." Early in the novel Holden thinks of phoning Jane's mother; twice thereafter he thinks of phoning Jane, but instead phones Sally. On two separate occasions phoning Jane is part of his fantasy. Toward the close of the novel he thinks of phoning her before going out west, but this bit of fantasy does not reveal a need for her, since, as we have observed, Holden's mood has become rational and volitional. But in the violent Hollywood fantasy earlier in the middle of the book, Holden does phone Jane, and she does come to succor him; any comfort, however, that the boy might derive from Jane, who is one of the two nodal images in his private world (the other being Allie), is immediately destroyed by the *ersatz* sentimental form of the fantasy. Equally significant for Salinger's purpose in underscoring the psychological remoteness of the image of Jane is the one time when Holden does actually phone her: there is no answer. His own world fails to respond. Thereafter come the visit to Central Park, the return home to Phoebe, and a concomitant spiritual recovery. (pp. 21–5)

Although the humanitarian role of saviour that Holden assigns himself stands in the foreground, we must nevertheless not fail to see that Phoebe is the essential source; and if Holden, on the path up out of spiritual dilemma and crisis, must find the verbal and conceptual means of expressing his innermost needs, Phoebe, as easily as she wakes up, expresses an even more fundamental insight through symbolic gesture. The charm of the scene, when fully comprehended from this point of view, lies in the mingling of the naive and childlike with the spiritually occult, in the immense discrepancy between means (a child) and ends (spiritual insight); for adults it is a rather puzzling and even terrifying charm, when they acknowledge it, discoverable in fairy tales and some of the teachings of Jesus. (p. 26)

In Holden's maturing there is no repudiation of childhood or even of the secret world. In the organic processes of life the continuity between childhood and maturity, need not, must not, be severed. If the child is father of the man, as Wordsworth said, assuredly society at large and parents in particular have scarcely encouraged this teenaged boy, well over six feet, with a crippled right hand and the right side of his head full of "millions of gray hairs," to think of his days in Wordsworthian fashion as "bound each to each by natural piety." For that reason his secret world, when released from the death-like enchantment of neurosis, may well have been, ultimately, the real source of his salvation. Certainly in the daylight return to Central Park with Phoebe Holden experienced the natural piety that Wordsworth celebrated, being at once child and parent with her, both in the zoo (he need no longer search for the ducks) and at the carrousel, watching Phoebe go round and round, another symbol for the circular activity of life. Here the sense of continuity that Holden demands in his surroundings ... receives a living affirmation when he comments with so much satisfaction that the carrousel "played that same song about fifty years ago when I was a little kid." When, to the adult reader's further amusement, Holden, like any apprehensive parent, says that Phoebe will have to take her chances with falling off the horse when reaching for the ring, the boy has added a cubit to his psychological stature.

The short concluding chapter, far from being the lame and defective appendage to a charming book that some think it, is like so much else in *The Catcher*, a triumph of technical virtuosity. In this reading of the novel the conclusion is blunted, and interestingly so, only because we cannot say what society will do to impose adjustment upon a boy who has effected his own secret cure; and we therefore close the narrative not with psychoanalytical questions, but ethical. In rejecting the formalism of psychoanalytical technique for the spontaneous personality Salinger follows D. H. Lawrence; and in boldly proposing that the resources of personality are sufficient for self-recovery and discovery, his book will stand comparison with [Hermann Hesse's](#) *Steppenwolf*, whose protagonist, Harry Haller, rises above his own neurosis in a discovery, based on Buddhistic thought, that the potentialities of the soul are limitless. Altogether, in this reading the answer to the question, "What is the nature of reality?" is both complex and simple, residing in the living, organic relation between childhood and maturity, continuity and change, the contemplative and the active, the external world and the inner spirit. This reality is not a philosophical abstraction, but an existentialist datum of physical and emotional experience. (pp. 26-8)

Once again there is an immense discrepancy between means (a child) and ends (spiritual insight). When the psychoanalyst (in the role of disciple) asks Holden (the master) whether he intends to apply himself at school, and Holden replies that he doesn't know because you don't know "what you're going to do till you do it," the surface impression is that of a typically unsatisfactory answer from a teenager. When D. B. asks him what he thinks about "all this stuff [he] just finished telling ... about" and Holden replies that he does not know what to think, the surface impression is the same. Finally, Holden proposes a riddle. He says that he misses everybody, even Stradlater, Ackley, and "that goddam Maurice." "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." Here is a shock to the conceptualizing, precept-laden intelligence, a puzzle or paradox that will not yield to logical analysis but that, on the contrary, sends the mind back over the experience recorded, even into the depths of the unconscious where both the malady and the cure lay. In the large, Whitmanesque acceptance of evil there is affirmation of the life-process as the personality "lets go"; and such Zen riddling is easily translatable into existentialist understanding.

In its emphasis on the conflict between the organic and the mechanistic, the secret and the public, reality and appearance, awakening and death, *The Catcher* hits off the strongest Romantic affirmations from Goethe and Wordsworth down to Lawrence, Joyce, and [Hesse](#). Whether at Walden Pond, at Weissnichtwo, or in New York hot spots, the problem of personality remains; one surmises that, after a century and more, as *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Steppenwolf* likewise indicate, the struggle has become intensified. At the close of *The Catcher* the gap between society and the individual has widened perceptibly; and far from repudiating Holden's secret world, Salinger has added a secret of psychological depth. A mechanistic society, represented just as much by Antolini as by the psychoanalyst, may with the glib teacher continue to ignore the boy and talk of "what kind of thoughts your particular size mind should be wearing"; we may all comfort ourselves with the reflection that, after all, Holden is another bothersome case of arrested development, albeit rather charming in a pathetic and oafish manner.

No doubt Salinger has overdrawn the portrayal, but a work of literature is not a statistic, it is a special vision. In its pathetic and sentimental tone *The Catcher* faithfully reflects the surface of American life, and insofar, therefore, as it lacks intellectual substance and a valid universality based on a cultural heritage, it falls far below the Romantic masterpieces to which I have made passing reference. But as I have tried to make clear, *The Catcher* is strongest where these are strongest. Whatever the dreadful odds, the human spirit, though slain, refuses to stay dead; it is forever hearing the cock crow, forever responding to the Everlasting Yea. So in *The Catcher*; and the blunted, ambiguous ending mingles with this affirmation the doubt whether now at last, in the long travail of the spirit, the odds have not become too dreadful. If, as this reading interprets the book, the scales tip in favor of the affirmation, it is so because the history of youth is almost always hopeful. (pp. 28-9)

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